DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 392 247 FL 023 578

AUTHOR Marsh, Christine A.
TITLE Middle School Students' Attitudes toward High School Foreign Language Study.
PUB DATE 95
NOTE 16p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Age Differences; *Course Selection (Students); *Educational Attitudes; Grades (Scholastic); High Schools; Intermediate Grades; Junior High Schools; Language Attitudes; *Middle Schools; *Secondary School Curriculum; *Second Languages; Sex Differences; *Student Attitudes; Surveys
IDENTIFIERS *Middle School Students

ABSTRACT

A total of 283 students at Fassett Middle School in Oregon, Ohio, a suburban, middle-class city were surveyed about their attitudes toward foreign language study in high school. The participants were 151 male and 132 female students in grade 6 (87), grade 7 (104), and grade 8 (92). The objective was to determine whether or not the middle school exploratory language component of the curriculum was achieving its goal of increasing student interest in language study. Most respondents had been enrolled in language courses during their middle school years. The teacher-developed questionnaire elicited information about students' grade, gender, languages studied, plans to take foreign language(s) in high school, plans to attend college; letter grades in languages taken; attitudes concerning the importance, requirement, and enjoyment of language study; and favorite and least favorite subjects in school. As anticipated, older students and students with higher language grades had more positive attitudes about language study. Female students had more positive attitudes, but students having taken at least two foreign language courses previously did not have significantly more positive attitudes than others. Contains 28 references and the survey used. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Running head: MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS' ATTITUDES

ED 392 247

Middle School Students' Attitudes Toward High School Foreign Language Study

Christine A. Marsh

Fassett Middle School

Oregon, Ohio

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Christine A. Marsh

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

FL023578

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Abstract

A total of 283 students at Fassett Middle School in Oregon, Ohio, a suburban, middle class city, were surveyed about their attitudes toward foreign language study. The participants were 151 male and 132 female students in Grade 6 (87), Grade 7 (104), and Grade 8 (92). Analysis of Variance tests, a Scheffé test and a t test were used to compare students answers, grouping them by gender (females scored higher), grade (Grade 8 higher), number of foreign language classes taken (no significant difference) , and grades received in foreign language classes (A's and B's higher). On a scale of 0 - 7, 40% of the students' attitudes were very good (5.5 - 7) and 45% were good (3 -5).

Middle School Students' Attitudes Toward High School Foreign Language Study

How important is it for high school students to study foreign language? Two or three years of a single foreign language, as well as adequate scores on proficiency tests, are required for entrance to and/or graduation from most American colleges. To many Americans, however, the attainment of foreign language proficiency is considered important only for foreign language teachers and interpreters. This limited view of its use fosters an attitude that foreign language study is not a necessary part of the basic educational system.

Will today's students be prepared to enter the job market upon completion of high school or college without the knowledge of a foreign language? The number of unskilled jobs continues to dwindle. Increasingly, students need to develop additional career-marketable skills. Proficiency in a foreign language can be an important adjunct skill in today's global society.

Rationale

Oregon Schools initiated an Exploratory Foreign Language program, FLEX (Lipton, 1994), at Fassett and Eisenhower Junior High Schools 12 years ago. The goals of the new program were: introducing the skills used in foreign language study; developing an interest in the study of foreign languages; helping the student to decide if he or she should take a foreign language; and aiding the student with the decision of which language to study. Fassett and Eisenhower have since become middle schools, and the FLEX program has changed considerably over the years --- often a result of scheduling difficulties. Is the program achieving its original goals? Is it the best choice of foreign language program for our students?

Background

FLES*, an umbrella term under which FLEX is only one of the approaches to foreign language classes in the elementary school, encompasses Grades K - 8 (Lipton, 1994). The content, orientation, length of foreign language classes, and year of introduction of foreign language study in elementary and middle or junior high schools varies considerably, with much

disagreement as to the "best" program model (Met, 1994; National Council of State Supervisors of Foreign Languages, 1994). FLEX, a short introductory course in each of the languages available for study at the high school level involving the use of many games and student-centered activities, has as its goal developing student interest in foreign language study rather than proficiency in the language (Kennedy & DeLorenzo, 1994).

Another FLES* approach involves a sequential program of foreign language, beginning in either the elementary or the middle school and continuing through the high school years (Knop & Sandrock, 1994). The sequential foreign language viewpoint considers the short exploratory courses to be superficial, somewhat confusing to the student, and time that could be better utilized for first-year level study of a chosen foreign language. One component of many sequential programs involves the use of the content-based approach in which students learn their academic subjects in both English and the foreign language. A third FLES* approach uses immersion or partial immersion in the foreign language; used in only 2-3% of elementary foreign language programs (Lipton, 1994), immersion aims to develop biliteracy (Hornberger & Micheau, 1993). The goal of both sequential and immersion programs is eventual proficiency in the chosen foreign language.

Previous Research

The type of FLES* program chosen for use in an elementary, middle, or junior high school is only one of many factors which affect student attitudes toward the study of foreign languages. Some students exhibit definite language learning problems. Sparks and Ganschow (1993) studied students who had difficulty with foreign language learning; they determined that linguistic coding problems in English were often at the root of foreign language acquisition difficulties. When a subject area becomes too difficult to comprehend, interest wanes and attitude toward the class suffers as a result.

A diversity of student learning styles and instructor teaching styles (Felder, 1995), complicates the problems, often resulting in student learning and behavior problems. Kern

(1995) researched student and teacher beliefs about language learning, finding many discrepancies between what instructors believed to be the best method of foreign language instruction and what techniques students believed were most meaningful to their development of proficiency in the foreign language.

Misunderstandings about expectations often results in anxiety on the part of the foreign language learner. MacIntyre (1995) contends that some of the learning problems that Sparks and Ganschow (1993) attribute to linguistic coding are a result of student anxiety. Vande Berg (1993) determined that even at the college level, small group work helps to alleviate stress in foreign language literature courses. Actively involving the student in the learning process, integrating socialization skills and cultural information with the language learning, and working in small groups improves the atmosphere of the foreign language classroom (Poole, 1992).

Also related to student interest and attitude is the impact of motivation on foreign language learning, extensively research by Gardner and MacIntyre (1993), Gardner and Tremblay (1994), Oxford (1994), Oxford and Shearin (1994), and Dörnyei (1994). Although there is much disagreement among the various researchers about how motivation influences language learning and how to measure it, all agree that motivation is essential for foreign language learning. "Lowering the affective filter" (Schinke-Llano & Vicars, 1993) in the foreign language classroom can be accomplished by implementing student-centered activites that increase student interest and motivation while at the same time reducing student anxiety and improving student attitudes toward foreign language learning.

What are the factors that lead to a positive learning environment? Are the approaches to and techniques that enhance foreign language learning in the elementary school or middle school appropriate for the high school foreign language student (Ralph, 1994)? Do younger students develop foreign language skills more quickly than do older students? A study by Harley, Howard, and Hart (1995) found that, contrary to popular belief, older students performed as well as, and sometimes better than, did the younger students in the study. Apparently, many

of the techniques employed with younger students, when implemented with older students, also result in enhanced learning.

A promising new technique promoted to improve foreign language comprehension involves the use of videos to introduce new foreign language vocabulary (Hanley, Herron, & Cole, 1995). Providing the students with culturally relevant, real-life situations, video introductions were shown to improve comprehension better than oral presentation---whether or not pictures were also included (Herron, Morris, Secules, & Curtis, 1995). Why not use the modern technologies with which students are well acquainted to pique their interest in foreign languages and cultures?

Activities in the foreign language classroom need to capture the attention of the middle school student and, in an enjoyable manner, start the student on the path to developing oral proficiency in the chosen language. Evaluation of oral proficiency in the foreign language classroom is difficult, but extremely important, if the goal of proficiency is to be achieved (Dansereau, 1995). A study by Moeller and Reschke (1993) compared classes of students working in small groups. In the experimental group, three or four students were randomly selected during each group activity to be graded on certain predetermined skills; eventually all students in the experimental group were graded. The students in the control group received no grades during the group work assignments. At the end of six months the control and the experimental groups were evaluated on their level of oral proficiency with no significant difference found between their scores. Grading is apparently not a motivational factor if the assignment is sufficiently interesting and relevant.

Although some school districts find it difficult to coordinate the middle school philosophy with foreign language proficiency goals, Verkler (1994) believes that middle school philosophy and foreign language acquisition theories are compatible goals. Many of the hands-on activities encouraged at the middle school level may also be adapted by foreign language teachers hoping to increase foreign language interest and learning.

Major Questions

Is the FLEX program at Fassett and Eisenhower Middle Schools developing in our students a positive attitude toward foreign language study? How do middle school students view the study of foreign language? Does the amount of time they are exposed to foreign languages influence their attitudes? Do other factors such as gender, grade, or letter grades received in foreign language courses affect their attitudes? These are questions that I attempted to answer by surveying the students at Fassett Middle School.

Method

Participants

The participants in the study were 283 students in Grades 6, 7, and 8 at Fassett Middle School in the suburban, primarily middle class city of Oregon, Ohio. Scheduling of special tutoring classes and programs prevented 7 students from taking foreign language classes, while 142 students had taken either French or Spanish, and 134 students were enrolled in both French and Spanish sometime during their middle school years. Students had French and/or Spanish as a 6-week or a 9-week course, depending on grade level and the year it was taken.

Measures

A teacher-developed survey form requested of students in Grade 6, 7, and 8 the following information: grade; gender; languages studied; plans to take foreign language in high school; plans to attend college; letter grades in French and/or Spanish classes taken; attitude questions about importance, requirement, and enjoyment of foreign language study; and favorite and least favorite subjects in school. (See Appendix.) The Kuder-Richardson formula (KR-21) was applied to the results of the survey questions resulting in a reliability score of $r = .51$ and a standard error of measurement of ±1.31.

Procedure

Students in Grade 6, 7, and 8 at Fassett Middle School were requested to fill out the teacher-developed survey form during their first period class on Tuesday of the last week of school. The students were informed that their survey information was anonymous and to answer the survey questions as honestly as possible. Completed survey forms were collected by a student in each first period class and delivered to the researcher. As a result, 283 survey forms were returned, representing the number of students in school on that particular day. The only students not involved were any students absent that day and a class of M.H. (Mentally Handicapped) students.

Tabulating the results involved grouping the students by the categories of grade, gender, grades received in foreign language classes, and number of foreign languages studied. The students' scores were figured on a scale of 0 to 7 points. An "X" or "Yes" answer to the two statements about plans to take foreign language in high school and plans to attend college were scored as one point each. An "Agree" circled for each of the three statement about importance of, requirement of, and enjoyment of foreign language study were scored as one point each. On the question of how many years of foreign language the student planned to take in high school, the student was scored zero points for a "0", one point for circling a "1" or a "2", and two points for circling a "3" or a "4".

Results

It was hypothesized that students in Grade 8 would produce higher scores on a measure of attitudes toward foreign language study than would students in Grade 7 or 6. The scores of students in Grade 8 ($M = 5.20$, $SD = 1.61$, $n = 92$) were significantly higher than the scores of students in Grade 7 ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.94$, $n = 104$) and Grade 6 ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 1.84$, $n = 87$), based on an Analysis of Variance test, $F(2, 280) = 4.28$, $p < .05$.

It was hypothesized that there would be no difference in the scores produced by males and by females on the survey. The scores of female students (M = 5.30, SD = 1.62, n = 132) were significantly higher than those of male students (M = 4.25, SD = 1.87, n = 151) using a t test, t (281) = -5.25, p <.01, two tails.

It was hypothesized that students receiving a grade of A or B would produce higher scores on the survey than those students receiving grades of C, D, or F in a foreign language class. The scores of students receiving an A, A-, or B (M = 5.47, SD = 1.46, n = 164) were significantly higher than the scores of students receiving a B-, C, or C- (M = 4.08, SD = 1.86, n = 61) and of those students receiving a D, D-, or F (M = 3.4, SD = 1.96, n = 58), based on an Analysis of Variance test, F (2,280) = 39.29, p < .05.

It was hypothesized that students who had taken two foreign language classes would score higher on the survey than would those students who had taken one class or no classes. No significant difference was found between the scores of those students who took two classes (M = 4.81, SD = 1.84, n = 134), one class (M = 4.73, SD = 1.96, n = 142), and no foreign language (M = 3.71, SD = 2.06, n = 7), based on an Analysis of Variance test, F (2, 280) = 1.11, p >.05. Subsequently, a Scheffé test, F (2, 280) = .95, p >.05, showed no significant difference between those students who had taken two foreign language classes and those who had taken none.

Discussion

The higher scores for students in Grade 8 compared to those students in either Grade 6 or 7 were expected and probably a result of increased age, experience, and maturity of the older students. Due to recent registration for high school classes, influenced by prospective choices about career and college, the questions were more relevant to the older students.

It was surprising that the number of foreign language classes taken did not result in a significant difference in attitude toward foreign language study. The number of students who had no foreign language exposure was small (7), possibly resulting in questionable reliability.

The lack of difference in scores between those who had taken one class and those who had taken two foreign language classes may be attributed to the fact that any exposure, no matter how long or how many times, will increase interest in and improve attitude toward foreign language study.

The significantly higher scores of female students compared to male students was unexpected; however, when compared to the answers supplied by students to the question of their favorite and least favorite classes, it makes more sense. Math was named by 20% of the male students as their favorite class and language arts (English) was mentioned by 20% as their least favorite class. Math was also mentioned as a favorite subject by 15% of the female students, but an additional 11% named math as their least favorite subject. Language arts, however, was named as a favorite subject by more than 5% of the female students. Apparently language skills in and attitudes toward English classes influence foreign language choices and attitudes as well as affecting development of the skills involved, as discussed previous research.

Although male and female students predominantly named the major academic subject areas in their answers, male students chose as answers a wide variety of other subjects. As a middle school, Fassett has an exploratory program encompassing various short courses throughout the year, giving students a large range of possible subjects from which to choose. Not giving the students a list of choices is a shortcoming of the survey which resulted in students naming 19 different subject areas. Low percentages for most subject areas made it difficult to assess the information about favorite and least favorite school subjects in a meaningful context.

During the past 12 years, foreign language has been extended downward in the middle school from Grade 8, to Grade 7, and now to Grade 6; with a foreign language course of study scheduled for next year, it is an appropriate time to reassess the middle school foreign language program. Moving to a sequential program at Grades 8 and/or 7 in place of the present FLEX program, while leaving Grade 6 as a foreign language exploration class, is worth considering if

we wish to keep the interest of our students as well as to advance their foreign language proficiency skills.

The main concern of this study was to determine if the FLEX program as it is presently administered at Fassett and Eisenhower Middle Schools is achieving the goals for which it was intended: increased interest in studying foreign languages and providing students with enough exposure that they will be able to make decisions about future foreign language study. With 40% of the students scoring 5.5 - 7 points (very good), 45% scoring 3 - 5 points (good), and a mean score of 4.744, the attitude toward foreign language study by the middle school students surveyed is favorable.

References

Dansereau, D. (1995). Phonetics in the beginning and intermediate oral proficiency-oriented French classroom. The French Review, 68, 638 - 651.

Dörnyei, Z. (1994). Motivation and motivating in the foreign language classroom. The Modern Language Journal, 78, 273 - 283.

Dörnyei, Z. (1994). Understanding L2 motivation: On with the challenge! The Modern Language Journal, 78, 515 - 523.

Felder, R. M., & Henriques, E. R. (1995). Learning and teaching styles in foreign and second language education. Foreign Language Annals, 28, 22 - 31.

Gardner, R. C., & MacIntyre, P. D. (1993). On the measurement of affective variables in second language learning. Language Learning, 43, 157 - 191.

Gardner, R. C., & Tremblay, P. F. (1994). On motivation: Measurement and conceptual considerations. The Modern Language Journal, 78, 524 - 527.

Hanley, J. E. B., Herron, C. A., & Cole, S. P. (1995). Using videos as an advance organizer to a written passage in the FLES classroom. The Modern Language Journal, 79, 57 - 66.

Harley, B., Howard, J., & Hart, D. (1995). Second language processing at different ages: Do younger learners pay more attention to prosodic cues to sentence structure? Language Learning, 45, 43 - 71.

Herron, C. Morris, M., Secules, T., & Curtis, L. (1995). A comparison study of the effects of video-based versus text-based instruction in the foreign language classroom. The French Review, 68, 775 - 795.

Hornberger, N. H., & Micheau, C. (1993). Getting far enough to like it: Biliteracy in the middle school. Peabody Journal of Education, 69, 30 - 53.

Kennedy, D. F., & DeLorenzo, W. E. (1994). The case for exploratory programs in middle/junior high school. Foreign Language Annals, 27, 69 - 73.

Kennedy, D. F., & DeLorenzo, W. E. (1994). Counterpoint to the sequential approach. Foreign Language Annals, 27, 84 - 88.

Kern, R. G. (1995). Students' and teachers' beliefs about language learning. Foreign Language Annals, 28, 72 - 92.

Knop, C. K. & Sandrock, P. (1994). Counterpoint to the exploratory approach. Foreign Language Annals, 27, 74 - 76.

Knop, C. K. & Sandrock, P. (1994). The case for a sequential second language learning experience at the middle level. Foreign Language Annals, 27, 77 - 83.

Lipton, G. C. (1994). FLES* programs today: Options and opportunities. The French Review, 68, 1 - 16.

MacIntyre, P. D. (1995). How does anxiety affect second language learning? A reply to Sparks and Ganschow. The Modern Language Journal, 79, 90 - 99.

Met, M. (1994). Current foreign language practices in middle schools. Foreign Language Annals, 27, 43 - 58.

Moeller, A. J., & Reschke, C. (1993). A second look at grading and classroom performance: Report of a research study. The Modern Language Journal, 77, 163 - 169.

National Council of State Supervisors of Foreign Languages. (1994). Foreign language programs and the middle school of the nineties. Foreign Language Annals, 27, 59 - 62.

Oxford, R. L. (1994). Where are we regarding language learning motivation? The Modern Language Journal, 78, 512 - 514.

Oxford, R., & Shearin, J. (1994). Language learning motivation: Expanding the theoretical framework. The Modern Language Journal, 78, 12 - 25.

Poole, D. (1992). Language socialization in the second language classroom. Language Learning, 42, 593 - 615.

Ralph, E. G. (1994). Middle and secondary L2 teachers meeting classroom management challenges via effective teaching research. Foreign Language Annals, 27, 89 - 103.

Schinke-Llano, L., & Vicars, R. (1993). The affective filter and negotiated interaction: Do our language activities provide for both? The Modern Language Journal, 77, 325 - 329.

Sparks, R. L., & Ganschow, L. (1993). The impact of native language learning problems on foreign language learning: Case study illustrations of the linguistic coding deficit hypothesis. The Modern Language Journal, 77, 58 - 71.

Vande Berg, C. K. (1993). Managing learner anxiety in leterature courses. The French Review, 67, 27 - 35.

Verkler, K. W. (1994). Middle school philosophy and second language acquisition theory: Working together for enhanced proficiency. Foreign Language Annals, 27, 19 - 42.

Appendix

FOREIGN LANGUAGE SURVEY

(The information in this survey is being used for a research project at BGSU.
Please be as honest as possible --- the survey information is anonymous.)

(Please circle) GRADE: 6 7 8

GENDER: MALE FEMALE

Please mark with an "X" those answers which apply to you:

In middle school, I have taken: _____ French _____Spanish
(For 7th and 8th graders, this year and last year)

_____ I plan to take a foreign language in high school.

_____ I plan to attend college after graduation from high school.

(Please circle):
Grade received in French (If taken): A B C D F

Grade received in Spanish (If taken): A B C D F

Foreign language study is important. AGREE DISAGREE

Foreign language study should be required in school. AGREE DISAGREE

I enjoyed studying a foreign language. AGREE DISAGREE

(Please circle a number): I plan to take 0 1 2 3 4
years of a foreign language in high school.

What is your favorite subject in school? _____

What is your least favorite subject in school? _____

THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS SURVEY. MERCI! GRACIAS!